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TFA and the Magical Thinking of the “Best and the Brightest”

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Abstract: This article draws on oral history testimonies to examine the experiences of participants in the inaugural 1990 cohort of Teach For America (TFA)—a group of young people dubbed the “best and brightest” of their generation and tasked with “saving” urban education. For 25 years, TFA has operated according to the principle of the “best and brightest,” in which it is assumed that participants’ personal qualities and prior academic achievement can stand in for deep professional knowledge and experience. Yet as our data show, the presumptions—that any “smart” person should be able to pick up teaching by doing it, that there is no specialized knowledge needed in order to teach, and that

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“outsiders” with little knowledge of a school community and its families can “swoop in” and “rescue” underserved students—ultimately set up and demoralized the participants with whom we spoke when they could not live up to such unrealistic expectations. Through participants’ words and experiences, framed in historical context, we raise questions about the myth of the “best and brightest,” the theory of action promoted by TFA, and what it takes to teach in urban classrooms.

Keywords: Urban education; urban teaching; educational history; oral history; politics of education; teacher preparation; teaching conditions

TFA y el pensamiento mágico de los "mejores y más brillantes"

Resumen: Este artículo se basa en testimonios de historia oral para examinar las experiencias de los participantes en la primera cohorte de 1990 de *Teach For America* (TFA) – un grupo de jóvenes conocido como los “mejores y más brillantes” de su generación y encargados con la tarea de “salvar” la educación urbana. Durante 25 años, TFA ha operado de acuerdo con el principio de los “mejores y más brillantes”, en el que se asume que las cualidades personales de los participantes y el rendimiento académico previo pueden sustituir conocimientos profesionales en profundidad y experiencia. Sin embargo, como nuestros datos muestran, las presunciones, de que cualquier persona “inteligente” debería ser capaz de enseñar desde un comienzo, que no hay conocimientos especializados necesarios para enseñar, y que “personas de afuera”, con poco conocimiento de una comunidad escolar y sus familias pueden “lanzarse” y “rescatar” estudiantes marginalizados-en última instancia desmoralizó a los participantes con los que hablamos cuando no pudieron cumplir con esas expectativas poco realistas. A través de las palabras y las experiencias de los participantes, enmarcados en un contexto histórico, planteamos preguntas sobre el mito de “mejores y más brillantes,” la teoría de acción promovida por TFA, y que se necesita para enseñar en aulas con alumnos de los sectores urbano pobres.

Palabras clave: Educación urbana; enseñanza urbana; historia educacional; historia oral; política de la educación

TFA e pensamento mágico dos "melhores e mais brilhantes"

Resumo: Este artigo é baseado em testemunhos de história oral para examinar as experiências dos participantes na primeira coorte de *Teach For America* (TFA) em 1990 – um grupo de jovens conhecido como os “melhores e mais brilhantes” da sua geração e encarregados d a tarefa de “salvar” a educação urbana. Por 25 anos, TFA tem operado em conformidade com o princípio dos “melhores e mais brilhantes”, no qual supõe-se que as qualidades pessoais dos participantes e desempenho acadêmico anterior pode substituir profundos conhecimentos e experiência profissional. No entanto, como nossos dados mostram, presunções, que qualquer pessoa “inteligente” deve ser capaz de ensinar desde o início, que nenhum conhecimento especializado é necessário para ensinar, e “estrangeiros”, com pouco conhecimento sobre uma comunidade escolar e suas famílias podem “mergulhar” e “resgatar” alunos marginalizados – em última análise os participantes com os quais falamos ficaram desmoralizados quando não podiam atender a essas expectativas irrealistas. Através das palavras e experiências dos participantes, enquadrados em um contexto histórico, fizemos perguntas sobre o mito de “melhores e mais brilhantes”, teoria da ação promovida pela TFA, e o que se precisa para ensinar em salas de aula formadas por alunos de setores urbanos empobrecidos.

Palavras-chave: educação urbana; história da educação; história oral; política da educação

Introduction

We are a group of recent graduates who believe that today’s brightest, most motivated students of every race and academic major should join together to help the United States in the places they are most needed—the schools.

Teach For America, 1989 recruitment letter (Kopp, 2001)

I remember the whole auditorium full of kids, you know, chanting, “best and brightest!”

1990 Alumnus Brent Lyles (B. Lyles, personal communication, April 1 2009)

In 1972, an intrepid young reporter named David Halberstam published a devastating chronicle of America’s part in the Vietnam War called *The Best and the Brightest*. Though nominally about the war, the book actually “became a book about America,” according to Halberstam (p. 668), “in particular about power and success in America, what the country was, who the leadership was, how they got ahead, what their perceptions were about themselves, about the country, and about their mission.” It was Halberstam’s brilliance to bring readers into the lives of men around Presidents Kennedy and Johnson and show the ways in which those individuals, despite their vaunted biographies and talents, “not only failed to prevent the mistakes of Vietnam but made them almost inevitable” (Packer, 2007, para. 3).

Far from celebrating the “best and the brightest,” Halberstam’s book served as an indictment, not necessarily of the men about whom he wrote but of a culture that lionized abstract “intelligence” over “true wisdom,” which Halberstam (1992) described as the “product of hard-won, often bitter experience” (p. xii). And while the notion of the “best and the brightest” became a familiar catchphrase over the years, it also came unmoored from Halberstam’s critique. As Halberstam (1992) himself reflected, the phrase “went into the language, although it is often misused, failing to carry the tone or irony that the original intended” (p. xx).

In conceptualizing the “best and brightest” as he did, with irony intact, Halberstam gave name to a cultural phenomenon that has also run through the history of teaching. That phenomenon involves the persistent effort to attract “desirable” groups or individuals into teaching in the belief that they are uniquely qualified—by way of their pedigree, background, or personal characteristics—to improve the educational status quo, even if those groups or individuals have no specific knowledge about how to teach. As a way of illustrating the problematic nature of this concept and the way it continues to play out in debates about teaching, this article examines the experiences of individuals who participated in the inaugural 1990 cohort of Teach For America (TFA)—a group of young people dubbed the “best and brightest” of their generation and tasked with “saving” urban education.

Since its launch in 1990, TFA has provided a selective, alternate route to teaching for graduates of elite colleges and universities: after a short (5–7 week) summer training course, participants take on a two-year teaching assignment in some of the poorest, most segregated, and challenging classrooms in the nation.

Conceived in part as a remedy for teacher shortages, TFA also capitalized on 1980s critiques of teacher quality, defining its mission not only as recruiting more teachers, but as attracting more “academically able,” teachers—better teachers, presumably, than those already in

classrooms (Kopp, 1989). Over the last quarter century, substantial money, time, and human capital have been poured into this notion that the “best and brightest” can save our schools. Today, though media accounts routinely invoke the “best and brightest” as a shorthand descriptor for corps members, TFA recruitment rhetoric no longer targets the “best and brightest” in so many words. Instead, its carefully worded appeals call for “remarkable and diverse individuals” and the “most promising future leaders” who can demonstrate leadership and “strong achievement” in academic and other settings.¹ TFA has also made dramatic changes since 1990 in the training provided to recruits, even publishing a book (see Farr, 2010) of teaching tips, which the cover proclaims are “drawn from 20 years of learning from Teach For America’s most successful teachers.”

Indeed, TFA has worked diligently over the years to try to make corps members’ participation more effective (Kopp, 2011). Yet the one thing the organization has not questioned is its faith that “smart people” somehow do not need deep preparatory experiences and ongoing mentoring and support for development in the classroom. As a result, TFA continues to operate today, as it has for 25 years, on the *principle* of the “best and brightest,” in which it is assumed that participants’ personal qualities and prior academic achievement can stand in for deep professional knowledge and experience. In TFA’s theory of action, the caliber of recruits is supposed to enable them to master excellent teaching in a matter of weeks, through exposure to a taxonomy of disconnected teaching techniques, which, as Mike Rose has argued, may be vitally important but do not work in isolation (Rose, 2014). Even now, in the face of diminishing numbers of applicants and conflicting evidence about TFA teachers’ effectiveness and attrition (Heilig & Jez, 2010), TFA has been loath to relinquish its fundamental adherence to the ideal of the “best and brightest.”

In what follows, we review America’s propensity across its educational history to “fix” education by “fixing” teachers and we explore the ways that the “best and brightest” trope has changed over time—in other words, the criteria for the “best and brightest” of today do not necessarily match that of other eras. We look specifically at how the “best and brightest” philosophy has operated in the example of TFA as a means of procuring “better” teachers. Our primary data consists of oral history testimonies from thirty TFA alumni who took part in the inaugural 1990 cohort; in analyzing these accounts, we pay special attention to participants’ memories of their teaching experiences and the conflicts they described between their status as “best and brightest” and their self-identified “failures” in the classroom. In looking closely at these participants’ experiences, we recognize idiosyncratic, individual narratives, but also more generally, we elicit a picture of the time period that includes the prevailing wisdom about how to improve education as well as the fundamentally troubling presumptions about teachers and teaching that have anchored the TFA initiative since its inception. By exploring the ways in which the “best and brightest” concept operated within TFA’s inaugural year, we offer an opportunity to examine the origins of this idea, its persistence over time, and its problematic influence on discourse and policy around teachers and teaching in this country.

The theory behind TFA suggests that by bringing their presumed special qualities—their elite education, leadership capacity, and idealism—to bear, TFA recruits will succeed as effective educators of those students with the greatest disadvantages, where others (i.e., more traditionally trained teachers) have failed. Yet, this line of thinking reflects misguided beliefs about both the privileged capabilities of the “best and the brightest” and what it takes to teach in urban classrooms. Ultimately, we aim to use participants’ words and experiences

¹ See the TFA website, especially: <https://www.teachforamerica.org/teach-with-tfa/tfa-and-you>.

to raise questions not only about the myth of the “best and brightest” and the presumptions promoted by TFA, but also, crucially, about the ways in which teachers are prepared (or not) for teaching low-income students of color.

Literature

Just as Halberstam’s (1972) book used life stories to explore not only the individuals who orchestrated the war, but more broadly, their country and their mission, so our study aims to investigate the experiences of individual TFA participants as situated within a larger historical moment of changing practices surrounding public education. Both generally and more specifically in the field of education, Halberstam’s cautionary meditation remains a useful corrective to the unchecked cultural faith in the capabilities of the “best and brightest” (Lippe, 2004). First year recruits in TFA were distinguished as the “best and brightest,” but had little knowledge, experience or understanding of how to teach underserved students in the nation’s most challenging schools; as they testified, their lack of specific knowledge undermined their efforts grievously. Yet the idea that personal qualities and characteristics and, more recently, academic achievement outweigh professional training and experience is not new. A closer look at educational history can help to situate how the concept of the “best and brightest” has operated within the field of teaching in the United States.

The perennialism of America’s efforts to improve schools is aptly chronicled in educational historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban’s (1995) seminal book, *Tinkering Toward Utopia*. Among the many varied approaches to improving schools, one persistent storyline has centered on efforts to “fix” the “problem” of the teacher (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Herbst, 1989; Johnson, 1989; Lortie, 1975; Murphy, 1990). Contemporary policy conversations focus on teachers as key players, the most important school-related variable affecting student achievement (i.e., U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Such conversations are quickly oriented toward figuring out how to increase teacher quality. Efforts over time to improve teachers’ ability to do their job have generally taken one of two approaches: either investment in developing teachers’ capacity (i.e., ratcheting up requirements for training, providing professional development support or resources, etc.) or circumvention of teachers. The latter may occur by way of “teacher proof” curriculum (Tanner & Tanner, 2007) or by efforts to improve upon the existing teacher force with “better” candidates.

This notion of attracting and relying on “better” candidates to improve teaching (rather than, say, induction support in schools or better preparation) has haunted America’s educational past. There is nothing wrong with attempts to recruit the best candidates possible, of course—the trick is defining what is meant by “best.” The shifting definitions of “best” in reference to teacher candidates at any particular moment reveal not only what was wanted in a teacher at that time, but, more broadly, important cultural preoccupations of that era (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Thus, when used in reference to teaching candidates, “best” has been a slippery concept, often serving as a proxy for gender, class and/or race (Rogers, 2009). As far back as the mid-nineteenth century, the desire for male teachers rather than female as the field became feminized (Mattingly, 1975) or Catharine Beecher’s notion that the best teachers came from the stock of native born, middle class women rather than immigrant or lower class women (Sklar, 1973), suggest that notions of teacher quality have long rested in personal characteristics and that these ideas have shifted over time.

By the post–World War II period, the professionalization of teaching had somewhat codified teacher qualifications, as teacher training moved firmly into the university and formal credentialing requirements were instituted to govern admission to the field (Fraser, 2006). But dissatisfaction with teacher quality persisted, and the following decades saw several experiments in the holy grail of attracting “better” candidates into teaching to improve education. For instance, in the 1950s, the Ford Foundation established the Fund for the Advancement of Education, which endeavored to attract into teaching “bright students” of the sort who typically “sought their calling in other, more prestigious, remunerative, and intellectually stimulating fields” (Stone, 1968, p. 6). The Fund’s programs targeted top-tier colleges and universities (where they could ostensibly tap into the “best and brightest”) and focused on upgrading teachers’ liberal arts content knowledge, giving short shrift to the knowledge associated with education coursework.

By the 1960s, complaints about teacher quality had changed, and began to center on the failures of traditionally trained, existing teachers to meet the needs of students from low-income backgrounds, especially children of color in urban areas. One proposed solution lay in the National Teacher Corps (NTC). A Great Society initiative, the NTC sought to attract a new breed of teacher, with qualities and attributes distinct from those of conventional educators, and employ a new approach to training. The Corps’ strategy involved recruiting bright, liberal arts graduates to be teaching interns in underserved classrooms, after engaging them in an alternative, university-based preparation that emphasized learning about the culture of poverty and students’ communities and neighborhoods rather than subjecting them to more traditional pedagogical courses. NTC teachers were to be recruited from the ranks of “outstanding people,” the “elite,” and “good people, who might not otherwise be attracted to teaching” (Rogers, 2009, p. 357), as an antidote to the perceived shortcomings of existing teachers. A victim of shifting political winds and the teacher surplus of the 1970s, however, the NTC was formally dissolved in President Reagan’s Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981 (Bosco & Harring, 1983).

With the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, which sounded an alarm about the failings and impending shortages of teachers, and the more recent No Child Left Behind, which legislated the call for a “highly qualified” teacher in every classroom, the effort to procure better teachers has continued to preoccupy policymakers and education reformers. Policy responses over this period increasingly emphasized initiatives designed to recruit new or different kinds of candidates into teaching, often by way of alternate certification routes, which grew exponentially over these years. In 1983, only twelve such programs operated in eight states, but by 2006, 485 alternative programs existed across the fifty states (Feistritzer, 2008). As Zeichner and Hutchinson (2008) explain, though reasons behind the expansion of alternate routes varied, one strong impetus came from the belief that, as long as a teacher possessed subject matter expertise, teaching “is largely an intuitive craft that can best be learned on the job” (p. 18). With the shift toward educational excellence that characterized the 1980s, education historian Jack Schneider (2011) suggests that education reformers also began to promote a “new vision of teacher quality” (p. 73), more closely tied to “prestigious alma maters” and “high grade-point averages” than to professional training. Indeed, TFA was the epitome of these ideals.

Teach For America emerged out of Wendy Kopp’s senior thesis at Princeton University (1989). Kopp’s idea—for a teacher corps that would draw talented young college graduates (who might otherwise not have gone into teaching) into needy classrooms for a limited period, akin to a domestic Peace Corps—was formulated as an antidote to the “sorry state” of education in the late 1980s and as a way of meeting the demand at the time for

academically able teachers. Within that paradigm, Kopp recognized the importance of selectivity to the nascent Corps’ appeal: only through selectivity could TFA “counteract teaching’s image as a ‘soft’ and downwardly mobile career” (Kopp, 2001, p. 34). As Kopp (2001, p. 45) described the promise of a “teacher corps” (that would ultimately become Teach for America), it turned on recruiting an elite population into the teaching profession. “This nation needs a Teacher Corps. . . . It will appeal to the very ‘best and brightest’—a group of individuals who will not respond to [other] current initiatives” (p. 45).

Though Kopp developed the concept of TFA as a way to address the challenge of staffing underserved schools with effective teachers, she also articulated grander hopes. Within her thesis, Kopp made a claim for the significance of what she called the “idea power” associated with a teacher corps: such a corps would not only supplement the teacher workforce, but the young people involved would also “focus a new spirit on the educational system and the profession of teaching” (1989, p. 52). Ten years into the operation of TFA, Kopp had refined her notion of “idea power” associated with the initiative. As she explained, beyond directly influencing children’s lives in the classroom, TFA could:

produce a change in the very consciousness of our country. The corps members’ teaching experiences were bound to strengthen their commitment to children in low-income communities and spur their outrage at the circumstances preventing these children from fulfilling their potential. . . . Those who would go into other sectors would remain advocates for social changes and education reform. They would become business leaders and newspaper editors, U.S. senators and Supreme Court justices, community leaders and school board members. And, because of their experience teaching in public schools, they would make decisions that would change the country for the better. (Kopp, 2001, p. 7)

As Kopp predicted, over the last twenty-five years, many of those who taught for TFA have gone on to illustrious careers beyond the classroom; indeed, the presence of TFA experience on a resume has come to represent yet another gilding of the “best and brightest” lily (Kavanaugh & Dunn, 2013; Labaree, 2010). As a result, many alumni have found TFA to be a viable stepping stone toward professional pathways in law, medicine, business, politics, and media, outside of education altogether. Of those alumni who stayed in education, some remained closely tied to classroom teaching, but many others pursued positions of power and decision-making within the educational system, riding the 1990s reform wave that attempted to reshape schooling according to corporate and market-based principles (Kavanaugh & Dunn, 2013). In this regard, Kopp’s program has offered a platform to generally well-informed, relatively privileged individuals, many of whom nonetheless lack deep experience and expertise in the relevant field.

If TFA did not introduce the idea of attracting “better”—however defined—people into teaching, it did revive the tendency of earlier eras, before the onset of credentialing requirements and the universal installation of teacher preparation within colleges and universities, to rely on personal characteristics and experiences, rather than training, as qualifications for teaching. Like the Ford programs and the National Teacher Corps, TFA aimed to attract into teaching the “best and brightest.” But unlike Ford and the NTC, TFA rejected the existing, university-based preparatory structure entirely, and privileged instead the combination of character, elite education, and personal qualities over the idea of a specific body of professional knowledge.

TFA was most definitely a creature of its time. Situated outside of the education establishment, the initiative became, for many, the darling of the market-oriented vision, developed in the 1980s and 1990s, of educational change led by “outsiders.” It also perpetuated the “best and brightest” myth, invoking a cultural faith in the ability of chosen individuals, despite their lack of specialized knowledge or skills, to solve the most intractable problems of the day. The experiences of the 1990 corps members go a long way toward dispelling this myth, and indicate the need to move toward a more realistic and informed understanding of what it will take to prepare effective teachers for this country’s most challenging schools.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the way in which the “best and brightest” trope operated in TFA, we privilege the investigation of participants’ lives and beliefs, drawing on their words and memories through the use of oral history evidence.² Specifically, we use our thirty 1990 TFA participants’ oral histories to understand the ways in which their recollections represent not only their individual life stories, but also broader cultural assumptions of the time. As a means of gathering data, oral history elicits the personal perceptions of individuals who “were there.” In the past, social scientists and historians treated personal narratives, including oral histories, as anecdotal (Dougherty, 1999) and “unreliable as a basis for generalization” (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008, p. 5). Increasingly, however, scholars recognize the integrity of oral histories in yielding a distinct type of knowledge, the subjective nature of which may actually be considered its strength. As Alessandro Portelli (1991) makes clear, “[T]he first thing that makes oral history different is that it tells us less about events [or facts] than about their meaning” (p. 50). Thus, rather than “discrete, value free data” about the past, oral histories are best understood as a trove of “elaborate, emotionally laden, intentional constructions,” in which analysis targets narrators’ subjective realities and aims to explore the ways that participants understood and perceived their experiences (Ben-Peretz, 1995, p. xvii; Quartz, 1985).

Narrators’ perceptions and understandings of their personal experiences also expose the broader network of social constraints and possibilities within which they acted (Dougherty, 1999; Dublin & Licht, 2000; Maynes et al., 2008, p. 10). Thoughtful analysis of oral histories can identify meaningful connections between individual and social experience, between “individual life trajectories and collective forces and institutions beyond the individual” (Maynes et al., 2008, p. 3). In the narratives of our TFA participants, we find not only stories of individual lived experience, but also powerful beliefs at the time about what it took to teach and how to improve schools, as well as the limits of the “best and brightest” approach to improving classroom teaching. For oral historians, such memories mark an important passage between individual and social memory (Eick, 2011).

Methodology

² In accordance with guidelines of the Oral History Association, we observe the methodological practice of identifying our narrators by their real names. This convention is an accepted aspect of oral history and exists because of the importance of context and identity in shaping the content of an oral history narrative. Participants who are identified by name have given permission in an IRB-approved consent form.

This article draws from a larger study about the inaugural corps of TFA teachers. We recruited subjects in the fall of 2008 by emailing all members of the 1990 cohort for whom the TFA website listed contact information (288 of about 480 original members) and inviting them to participate in an oral history interview. Of these, 56 alumni responded and agreed to be interviewed.³ From this group, we selected a pool of 30 individuals who represented diversity on the basis of four key variables: gender, undergraduate institution attended, region where they taught, and current career.⁴ We also considered program completion, choosing 24 individuals who finished their two-year commitment to TFA and, through purposeful “snowball” sampling, locating six alumni who left before the end of their two-year commitment.⁵

Once we had selected our sample, we conducted in-depth, 2-hour long oral history interviews using an informal interview guide that addressed participants’ backgrounds, TFA experiences, and subsequent career choices (Braungart & Braungart, 1990; Yow, 1994). Transcriptions of each digitally recorded interview yielded between 80–120 double-spaced pages, and were sent to participants for their review. Data analysis was an ongoing process, which involved reading transcripts and coding for emergent themes as well as themes developed *a priori*.

We undertook our coding manually, creating several tables based on *a priori* themes, in order to systematically mine the narrators’ testimonies for specific factors, such as parents’ levels of education, religious background, family involvement with civic action, career choices, and descriptions of participants’ TFA teaching experiences. To elicit new themes, both authors read the interview transcripts multiple times, independently noting preliminary codes. We then came together to share and review our initial codes, to ensure that they accurately described the themes emerging from the data. Through this emergent theme approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994), we moved to “focusing” the codes as relevant themes were revealed (Charmaz, 2006). Once we had completed coding for each working theme, we separated the data that supported each theme (some data supported more than one theme, necessitating copies) and placed it into separate theme files. Working together, we used the materials in each file to develop our ideas about the significance, meaning, and place of these themes within our larger body of work.

While we sought commonalities among the narratives, we did not lose sight of the individual and idiosyncratic nature of the stories that emerged; we balanced appreciating the participants’ stories as *theirs*, on the one hand and, on the other hand, subjecting those stories to scholarly interpretation and analysis, with the intention of drawing general insights to describe a particular historical moment (Smulyan, 2004; Wolf, 1996). We further addressed this potential conflict by referring to primary source materials, including studies, newspaper and journal articles, and reports, as well as secondary literature, to establish the larger context of urban teaching and Teach for America at that time. Within this larger framework, we could then analyze and compare the subjective experiences of the TFA participants so as to

³ We attribute this high response rate (of nearly 20%) to Megan’s participation in the 1990 TFA cohort; her identity as an “insider” within the target group may have lent our inquiry legitimacy.

⁴ We had no formal way of determining participants’ race, though we did try to control informally for a racially diverse sampling.

⁵ Michel Patton (1990) describes snowball sampling as follows: “By asking a number of people who else to talk with, the snowball gets bigger and bigger as you accumulate new information rich cases” (p. 176).

understand what aspects of their stories might have been idiosyncratic and how largely shared experiences that reflected their realities were situated in time and space..

Findings and Discussion

A New Iteration of the “Best and Brightest”

In Halberstam’s original reckoning, he qualified the men he studied as the “best and brightest” on the basis of their “impeccable credentials”: they embodied the Establishment, they knew “the rules of the game,” they made their way up the ladder by virtue of their own brilliance and ability but also because of who their parents were. They went to the right schools, joined the right clubs, and worshipped in the right Protestant churches; they married well. By 1990, however, the very idea of who constituted the “best and brightest” had changed. Educational status, more than background and breeding, arbitrated who would win and who lose in the American system. This occurred in large part because of the “democratization of higher education” that took place during the post-war years, as the crusades of the 1960s and 70s opened opportunity to a broader swath of the populace (Kingston & Lewis, 1990, p. 106; Lemann, 2000). As a result, college admissions shifted from “the old aristocracy to the new meritocracy: from cast, ‘character,’ and connections to scores and grades” (Deresiewicz, 2014, p. 32). Historian Jerome Karabel (2005) focused on this transition as it occurred at several elite universities, showing how, over the post-World War II period, admissions policies essentially redefined merit to prioritize academic skills over upper class membership.⁶ Consequently, students who could demonstrate themselves to be “smart and capable” enough to gain admission to the most selective institutions became the “rising meritocrats,” resetting the rules that governed the old order of privilege (Karabel, 2005; Sullivan, 1999).⁷ Of course, while students at the most selective institutions of higher learning may no longer have represented a “common cultural identity,” researchers have also suggested that such students have been “decidedly affluent,” coming from the top echelons of the income hierarchy, compared to the population of college students as a whole (Kingston & Lewis, 1990, p. 110, 116).

The changing population of leading higher education institutions marked a fundamental change in the calculation of status in American society. Accordingly, as measured by attendance at an elite college or university, membership in the “best and brightest” shifted from the economic and cultural “silver spoon” ideal about which Halberstam wrote to include individuals with a broader variety of backgrounds, experiences, and personal characteristics. In the case of the inaugural TFA participants we interviewed, we found their lives to be a vivid illustration of these shifts. Indeed, their identities not only contradict older assumptions about who belongs to the select group of the “best and brightest” but also forecast the greater cultural diversity that has characterized contemporary TFA cohorts.

⁶ As a second part of his argument, however, Karabel does suggest that the adoption of merit as academic skill was undermined by concomitant efforts toward greater racial diversity, which relied on consideration of factors beyond academic skill.

⁷ It is worth noting that while students at the most selective institutions of higher learning no longer represented a “common cultural identity,” researchers have also suggested that such students have been “decidedly affluent,” coming from the top of the income hierarchy, compared to the population of college students as a whole. See Kingston & Lewis, 1990, p. 110, 116.

TFA and the Aura of Selectivity: The Role of Educational Status

In her plan to identify the “best and brightest” recruits for TFA, Kopp relied heavily on educational status, represented by graduation from top colleges and universities, as a telling indicator. Taking into account academic competitiveness and racial and ethnic diversity, striking a balance between public and private, and seeking a broad geographic range, TFA purposefully chose a hundred very selective institutions where recruitment would take place in the spring of 1990 (Kopp, 2001, p. 29). The recruitment process confirmed the tacit wisdom that those who make it through the “highly competitive [college] admissions process are seen as the best and the brightest, those qualified—perhaps even destined—to have the most prized careers” (Kingston & Lewis, 1990, p. 105). Within those top colleges and universities, recruiters aimed to identify candidates whom they assessed to be “exceptional” or “outstanding” according to TFA’s carefully defined selection criteria, which included characteristics such as commitment, integrity, and conceptual ability/intellect.⁸ The interview process itself was to be “tough,” with “pointed questions” designed to gauge candidates’ qualities (Kopp, 2001, p. 35).

In her insistence on selectivity, Kopp tapped into a deeply held capitalistic ideal that marketing professionals have long exploited: “Exclusivity (i.e., rarity and scarcity) not only signals high social status by limiting common access, but it also enhances signaling quality by increasing its distinctiveness, uniqueness, and salience” (Oh, 2013). This idea has gained particular traction in higher education. As Arizona State University President Michael Crow (2011) observed, “higher education is dominated by a model in which status is attained through the maintenance of scarcity [which] is sanctioned by tradition and attained through exclusivity.” Kopp deftly marshaled such cultural beliefs to guide the development of TFA and, with some sleight of hand, brokered the marriage of these contrasting entities: exclusivity and the mass occupation of teaching. Kopp not only suggested that exceptional talent could be persuaded to choose, at least for a short time, teaching—a job that such individuals would likely have perceived as low status, compared to their other options—but that success at an elite college or university would in itself qualify the TFA recruits to undertake that job effectively.

The “Best and Brightest,” *circa* 1990

In the space of a year, Kopp nurtured her idea for a domestic teacher corps from undergraduate thesis to fundraising proposal to reality and, in the spring of 1990, winnowed 2,500 applicants to 500 TFA recruits who would tackle the toughest teaching assignments in America. As Kopp (2001) wrote, because the quality of applicants had been so high, it had been easy to choose 500 “great” candidates. According to TFA staff, the majority of corps members were European American (71%), but 16% of the recruits were African American, 8% were Latino/Hispanic, and 5% Asian American (C. Skinner, personal communication, September 22, 2009), representing far greater diversity than that found in general in the teaching force in 1990, which was 92% White, 5% Black, and 2% Latino (Feistritzer, 2011). The corps also struck a surprising balance between women, who made up 55% of the first

⁸ The full list of twelve selection characteristics included: persistence, commitment, integrity, flexibility, oral communications skills, enthusiasm, sensitivity, independence and assertiveness, ability to work within an organization, possession of self-evaluative skills, ability to operate without student approval, and conceptual ability/intellect (Kopp, 2001, p. 35).

year recruits, and men (45%), given the association of teaching with women's work and the gender proportions of teaching nationally at the time, in which 72% of teachers were women (Snyder & Dillow, 2012).⁹

Most students at elite schools tend to come from the upper income strata (Astin & Osegueda, 2004; Kingston & Lewis, 1990). Though many of the 30 participants from the 1990 corps that we interviewed did not come from affluent backgrounds, by virtue of their and their parents' educational backgrounds, they possessed a significant form of status. To more closely gauge this form of status, we used the report, *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall, 1986* (a large annual survey of first-time, full-time freshmen enrolled in a broad sample of institutions), as a point of comparison.¹⁰ Specifically, we compared our participants' parents' educational background as well as the status of participants' undergraduate institution to figures in *The American Freshman*. Such comparisons, we hoped, would help to characterize our sample as being eligible (or not) on such status markers (parents' level of education and undergraduate college) for membership in the "best and brightest."

Within our sample, 24% of the fathers and 40% of the mothers had not earned a bachelor's degree. Indeed, for 30% of our interviewees, neither parent had received a college degree. (Interestingly, this nearly matches the proportion of 2015 corps members—34%—who were the first in their families to graduate from college).¹¹ This seemed somewhat surprising at first, but proved to be less so in context. According to 1986 *American Freshman* data, only 20%—slightly less than our sample—of freshmen at highly selective private universities had fathers who did not earn a college degree. But when measured against freshmen at highly selective public institutions, where 37% of the freshmen surveyed reported fathers who did not earn a college degree, our sample looks more elite. Similarly, fewer freshmen—around 35%—at highly selective private universities than in our sample had mothers who did not earn a college degree; while at the highly selective public institutions, more freshmen (nearly 55%) than in our sample reported that their mothers had not attained a college degree. Among all freshmen (across a broad range of institutional prestige) who took the survey, nearly 60% had fathers who did not finish college and just over 70% reported that their mothers had not completed a college degree. This suggests that while our sample may not represent the very highest levels of status (as measured by parents' educational background) associated with students attending highly selective private universities, it nevertheless exemplifies a high level of status, especially in comparison to the broader population of students attending institutions of higher education at the time.

In order to investigate the status of participants' undergraduate institutions, we borrowed from Kingston and Lewis' (1990) research on elite institutions of higher education and stratification, and concentrated on the standard selectivity index for colleges and universities. We paid particular attention to those institutions classified as (a) four-year private nonsectarian colleges—*very high selectivity*, and (b) private universities—*high selectivity*.

⁹ TFA demographics procured through communication with Cynthia Skinner, Teach For America, September 18, 2009. Skinner also gave the total number of recruits at 483, suggesting some attrition before the program commenced.

¹⁰ Not all of the TFA recruits in our sample started postsecondary education in the fall of 1986, but because most of them did, the study is intended to provide a reasonable basis for comparison.

¹¹ Demographic facts for the 2015 cohort were procured from the TFA organization website, on September 30, 2015, at <https://www.teachforamerica.org/about-us/media-resources/news-releases/teach-america-welcomes-25th-anniversary-corps-bringing-its>

Much as Kopp had anticipated, the “eliteness” of institutions was largely determined by their selectivity in undergraduate admissions (Astin & Henson, 1977). The “high selectivity” category of private universities (28 institutions), as Kingston and Lewis point out, predictably included Ivy League universities (Harvard, Yale, Columbia), but also schools such as Tufts University, the University of Notre Dame, and Vanderbilt University; the “very high selectivity” category of four-year, private, nonsectarian colleges (46 institutions) contained prominent liberal arts colleges—Dartmouth College, Williams College, Colby College—as well as some of the Seven Sisters, such as Smith College and Wellesley College. This category also included what Kingston and Lewis (1990) classified as lesser elites, such as Franklin and Marshall College, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, and Lehigh University.

Of our 30 interviewees, 11 attended high selectivity private universities; eight went to very high selectivity, four-year non-sectarian private colleges; and three earned degrees from high selectivity public universities. Among the remaining eight participants, five attended institutions that did not appear in the HERI study; two of those institutions—the University of Chicago and College of the Holy Cross—would likely have been considered high selectivity institutions. The rest of the sample attended medium selectivity institutions, with the exception of one participant who graduated from a low selectivity institution and one woman who graduated from a selective, private, historically Black college. A large majority (about 80%) of the individuals we interviewed hailed from educational institutions and family educational status associated with the most elite levels of the stratified system illustrated in *The American Freshman, 1986* report. In the status and privilege thus conferred, they certainly would have fit comfortably within some aspects of Halberstam’s “best and brightest,” bearing witness to the success of Kopp’s strategy (Kingston & Lewis, 1990).

Yet even if these participants represented what the “best and brightest” had come to be by 1990, standing out in terms of their educational background and attainments, they did not necessarily conform to broad cultural assumptions associated with the “silver spoon” profile of the elite featured in Halberstam’s portrait. The inaugural TFA cohort was more ethnically diverse than the so-called best and brightest of Halberstam’s generation and included a preponderance of women. And rather than mainline Protestantism, a burgeoning diversity of religion characterized our interview participants. Fully a third of them described a strong Catholic upbringing; others came from faith traditions as wide ranging as Seventh-day Adventist, African Methodist Episcopalian, Evangelical Christian, and Missouri Synod (a conservative Lutheran sect). The parents of one individual were even among the first members of the Unification Church in America, colloquially known as “Moonies.” The religious backgrounds of some participants overlapped with unconventional, even counter-cultural, politics as well, which would have been highly unusual among the “best and brightest” of Halberstam’s generation.

Finally, the 1990 alumni with whom we spoke represented a fairly wide range of socio-economic or class backgrounds and a correspondingly broad spectrum of cultural capital. Such socio-economic diversity directly contradicts the link researchers have established between affluence and attendance at elite institutions of higher education. This is somewhat remarkable, because as Karabel (2005) established, highly selective colleges and universities have been least successful in their efforts to diversity on the basis of socio-economic status. Within our sample, for the nearly one-third of alumni interviewed whose parents had not attended college, the path to higher education (much less their membership in the fraternity of the “best and brightest”) seemed somewhat happenstance. Carlos Gomez explained how his mother, a Colombian immigrant, relied on an executive at the bank where she worked to guide Gomez through the college admissions process. Gomez ended up at the

very same institution—College of the Holy Cross—that the executive had attended and described his decision as “uninformed” at best (C. Gomez, personal communication, May 6, 2009). Priscilla Leon-Dideon, who, as a good immigrant daughter, was already doing her family’s taxes in high school, recalled that she “had no one at home to ask for help. No cousins, nobody at the time could have helped me. I was the first one” (P. Leon-Dideon, personal communication, June 7, 2009). Avis Terrell ended up at Wesleyan College by way of the program Prep for Prep, which she described as “a program that helped minority students who they felt were academically strong get into private [colleges]” (A. Terrell, personal communication, September 26, 2009). Even some of those whose parents had gone to college remembered needing considerable help in making their way to the institutions of the “best and brightest.” So although Leo Flanagan’s parents attended college, he depicted his upbringing as having been “blue collar”—his father was a butcher—and noted that “a very good guidance counselor,” rather than a family connection or expectation, forged his path to Colby College (L. Flanagan, personal communication, February 23, 2009).

Christina Brown, an African American graduate of Franklin and Marshall College, remembered feeling critical of the TFA staff’s failure to acknowledge participants’ socio-economic diversity:

[I]t was clear that the people that were running the program had . . . a lot less experience . . . [with] what it was like for people who didn’t have parents sending them money from home to get them through. . . . [T]here was one [time] where, like, they [TFA staff] lost a bunch of checks for our teacher tests, and they just said, ‘Write another one.’ I felt like, ‘We just graduated from college; we have no money; we have no jobs; we’re out here with you. We don’t have other checks.’ (C. Brown, personal communication, April 4, 2009)

As she elaborated, “There was [an] expectation that you could sort of support yourself or write another check and it would all work out.” However, that wasn’t the case for those corps members who did not come from affluent backgrounds.

The 1990 corps members essentially illustrate how status determination had changed over time. As elite education and academic skills came to define merit over and above family background or characteristics historically associated with the upper class, the “best and brightest” became more diverse in terms of race, gender, religion and even, on the evidence of this group, social class than would have been typical in the 1960s, for instance. Having attended elite colleges and universities and gained the social capital such experiences provided, and then having been selected into the special association of TFA, many recruits we interviewed were flattered to think of themselves as part of the “best and brightest,” even if some also nurtured doubts about whether they truly belonged to this exclusive group.

“Best and Brightest”: The 1990 TFA Corps

Though the premise of TFA lay in attracting recruits whose special qualities, rather than professional education or experience, would equip them to teach, Kopp’s vision did account for the need for some training. And so, before heading to their classroom placements across the country, participants in that first cohort gathered in Los Angeles, where they took part in an 8-week summer training institute designed to prepare them to “do the best possible job during the two years they would be teaching” (Kopp, 1989, p. 1). The Summer Institute marked the initiation of participants’ TFA experience: it was where

they came together as a corps and where they first seriously grappled with what knowledge and qualities they would need in order to teach. The Summer Institute was also when participants found themselves celebrated as the “best and brightest,” both by media accounts and also through the heady sense of having been chosen for a critical mission and in their mutual estimations of one another.

An adulatory press helped to support and publicize the association between TFA and the “best and brightest” of the generation. Leading up to and during the 1990 Summer Institute, corps members saw their virtues extolled in the pages of national news magazines, such as *U.S. News & World Report*, and on network news shows, such as the *NBC Nightly News*. They were pronounced the “best and the brightest” by the likes of New York City Schools Chancellor Joseph Fernandez, among others (for example, see Appleman, 1990; Tifft & Cray, 1990; Toch, 1990). On the morning Ellen Rosenstock flew to L.A. to attend the Summer Institute, she recalled, she turned on the TV to find a segment on *Good Morning America* devoted to TFA. In her memory, the broadcast portrayed TFA and its recruits as “saving the world” (E. Rosenstock, personal communication, May 6, 2009). According to Lisa Robinson, her parents found it “really cool” that she was featured in a *Time Magazine* article about Teach For America (Tifft & Cray, 1990). Although the article focused on Wendy Kopp’s role in founding TFA, Robinson recalled its description of first year participants (in her words) as “young and optimistic people who believe that we could make a difference in education” (L. Robinson, personal communication, February 25, 2009). Such high profile coverage stoked participants’ initial excitement and fed their sense of importance.

That very public focus on the idea that TFA participants would “save” education, however, provoked criticism as well as praise. In a scathing *New York Times* editorial (1990), former teacher Marcella Spruce (who had earned a BA from Bowdoin College and a Master in Education from Harvard University) objected to the way that the media and Teach for America organization celebrated the untested participants and their potential contributions:

There’s an implication that college students can go in, Indiana Jones-fashion, and rescue our failing schools . . . I confess that I am dismayed by what I perceive as a kind of underlying arrogance in Teach for America. The idea of breezing in from Princeton or Bowdoin to save kids . . . leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

Spruce’s critique highlighted implicit assumptions about existing teachers—incompetence, but also laziness or even irrelevance—that propelled TFA’s implicit argument that the “best and brightest” would succeed where existing teachers had failed. At the heart of these assumptions, of course, lay the question of whether, simply by virtue of their elite education and their identities, the TFA participants could do better for children in underserved schools than could existing teachers.

In addition to media coverage, the new recruits’ perceptions themselves helped to reinforce their special status. As they understood, membership in TFA—even in this inaugural year—meant being part of something elite, selective, and important. Kathy Feeley remembered specifically how the association of TFA with the “best and the brightest” first attracted her to the program. As she explained, “you know, [the idea that] this is the ‘best and the brightest’ and you’re going to go out there and fix all of America’s public schools . . . [that] appealed to my vanity” (K. Feeley, personal communication, January 26, 2009). In her memoir about TFA, Wendy Kopp recalled corps members chanting “TFA, TFA,” in celebration of themselves and their mission at the opening ceremony of the Summer

Institute. Several participants corroborated this account: Brent Lyles recalled plenary sessions with all of the corps members at the University of Southern California in which “the whole auditorium full of [corps members], you know, [was] chanting ‘best and brightest!’” Fellow corps member Furman Brown ruefully admitted, in retrospect, his perception that, “We were all so full of ourselves!” (F. Brown, personal communication, December 29, 2008).

Many interviews made mention of the extraordinary quality of the other corps members—for instance, Jeff Simes, who arrived on the heels of graduating from Yale University, remembered that he was “insanely impressed by the people in the program,” who were, in his opinion, “among the best people I’ve ever . . . been with” (J. Simes, personal communication, February 9, 2009). Constance Bond responded not only to the perceived caliber of individuals around her, but also to the promising futures she imagined they were poised to achieve:

I remember looking around the room going, “This group of people . . . [is] astounding. I mean, what’s going to happen 10 to 20 years from now? These people are going to be governors and senators. What’s that going to mean?” I think I even wrote that down somewhere. Like, “If this keeps going, the alums are going to be something special.” So that was powerful to me at the time. (C. Bond, personal communication, February 9, 2009)

While participants’ interviews revealed the genuine esteem in which they held their fellow corps members, analysis also exposed interesting distinctions in how some individuals viewed their place within the group. Ellen Rosenstock described how participants sang about being the “best and the brightest” at some of the whole group meetings, she also admitted the moniker represented a new identity for her: “I had never . . . thought of myself in that category.” First-generation college graduate Kathy Feeley (who earlier described TFA’s association with the “best and brightest” as appealing to her vanity) recalled growing up in a working class household in upstate New York before attending Colgate University. In portraying her peers as “really high-powered people” within the “best and brightest” tradition, Feeley conveyed an impression of privilege or influence among the cohort, which she implied she did not necessarily share. Here, Feeley’s sentiments suggest a lingering perception that, even in 1990, the “best and brightest” reflected privilege beyond academic attainment and serve as an important reminder that elite institutions themselves contain social stratification.

In School: “Difficult Classrooms” and “Blighted Neighborhoods”

At the close of the corps’ first teaching year, the *New York Times* published an article taking stock of their experiences. Reporter Susan Chira (1991) wrote that, despite some discrete success stories, many participants “spoke of anguish and frustration” as they confronted the “realities of difficult classrooms and the blighted neighborhoods around them.” Indeed, our oral histories reveal in painful detail the particular struggles that participants faced both in the classroom and in the communities where they worked. In what follows, we explore these challenges from the perspective of participants, most of whom, despite their supposed strengths as the “best and brightest,” were deeply troubled by what

they perceived as their failure to fulfill their charge.¹² In their accounts, participants described not only the challenges they faced, but also the personal and physical toll of the work and the anxiety of failing—not a feeling to which they were accustomed—that they experienced during this time.

Yet if our interviewees believed that they had failed, it is worth noting that since that first cohort entered schools in 1990, the many studies that have attempted to determine more objectively the effectiveness of TFA teachers compared to more traditionally trained teachers have produced mixed results (See Heilig & Jez, 2010, for a thorough review). As education statistician Gene Glass (2008) summarized, the heat of these debates and the relatively “abstruse matters of statistical methods” that have fed the research discrepancies mean that “there is little reason to expect any consensus on the question of relative effectiveness [of TFA]” (p. 1) any time soon. From the perspective of those who worked with the first cohort of TFA teachers, one Harlem principal described them as “wonderful” and “superior” to other teachers; an administrator in the Los Angeles Unified School District, on the other hand, was more equivocal in his assessment, suggesting that the TFA teachers “were on par with other people going through emergency credentialing,” which was to say, he did not find that they did “exceptionally well, or any better than fully credentialed teachers” (Chira, 1991). Given the competing claims of scholarship regarding TFA teachers’ effectiveness, as well as the focus of this article on understanding the TFA participants’ experiences as they remembered and understood them, it seems important to establish that most of those with whom we spoke believed, ardently and regrettfully, that they had not succeeded, and that the work of teaching and the environments in which they were expected to do so presented more challenges than they could handle.

Difficult classrooms. For many of the 1990 participants interviewed, their status as the “best and brightest” did not equip them to succeed in the classroom; for some, the designation itself became problematic. For example, when Furman Brown arrived at the Normandy Avenue Elementary School in South Central Los Angeles, where he had been assigned to teach, he explained, the school principal introduced him in front of an auditorium full of teachers and students as “one of the best and the brightest that [has] come [to] help transform our school.” As Brown remembered, “[T]hey looked at me, all the other teachers, like, ‘uh huh’ . . . it was horrible. . . . But that’s how we were describing ourselves.” Brown went on to suggest that, “I think we all kind of bought into that notion of we were going to come in and save these kids,” a stance influenced by the fact that, “we were leaders, and successful. And couldn’t not be.” Brown’s anecdote epitomizes exactly what Marcella Spruce had objected to: the implicit critique that existing teachers had failed because they were not good or bright enough and that TFA teachers would “breeze in” to make things right. This could not have endeared the recruits to the teachers with whom they worked, and yet, as Furman Brown was fortunate enough to experience, instead of ostracizing him, his colleagues became an anchor for him as he entered the rough waters of the classroom.

Brown’s comment also indicates the psychological conflict that participants experienced. The majority of our participants across the TFA placement sites admitted that

¹² Along with the overwhelming reports of failure, however, some participants did believe their classroom experiences improved during year two; others identified somewhat redeeming experiences within extracurricular activities they created for students.

once they got into their classrooms, teaching was much harder than they ever expected.¹³ They may have been lauded as the “best and brightest,” but they could barely get through a lesson, much less revive a failing system of education. They were used to being successful leaders, as Brown observed, and “couldn’t not be,” setting up tremendous internal conflict between their need to succeed and their lack of knowledge about fundamental aspects or core practices of teaching. By their own admission, the new TFA teachers possessed scant understanding about the basics of teaching and learning, pedagogy, and curriculum. They did not have a good working knowledge of how to develop lesson plans, create units of study, or assess their students’ learning.

The lack of lesson plans and learning objectives that characterized many corps members’ classrooms contributed to an unfortunate classroom environment, which the TFA teachers strained to manage. As Constance Bond explained:

I did not have an academic plan. They [her students] basically knew it and to them it was just a free-for-all. So it was behavioral problems that were killing me, but now I know it was because I had nothing. I was not going in prepared . . . for them to learn. They just were running me into the ground and they knew how to do it.

Bond said at the time she was “asking anybody for classroom management strategies, which, of course, are all empty because . . . [i]t’s not about ‘managing’ them.” As she related in her oral history interview, Bond later came to understand that a strong instructional plan would have alleviated many of her management issues.

Without a command of teaching methods that might have helped to make the schoolwork accessible to the students, many found themselves casting about for appropriate pedagogies—ways of teaching that would honor the students and the subject matter—without any conception of what those might look like. Eric Bird remembered learning from the TFA Summer Institute that, “having kids sit in their desks, filling out work sheet pages was not a good way to teach kids”; at the same time, he admitted, he wasn’t sure what *was* an appropriate experience. As Bird explained, “[U]nfortunately for me, while I agreed with that [i.e., the idea of not using worksheets] and I tried to stay away from worksheet pages, I didn’t have anything to fill it in with—just my lack of experience and lack of help” (E. Bird, personal communication, March 16, 2009).

One common area of difficulty lay in the teaching of reading. Learning to read is not always a natural or necessarily easy process, and teaching students to read represents a complex endeavor that, in the best cases, draws on a deep knowledge base of literacy and broad repertoire of instructional strategies (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006; Graves, 1991; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). The alumni who taught young children told similar stories about their panic in trying to figure out how to teach reading. As Christina Brown recalled, “I didn’t know anything about teaching kids how to read. I literally knew how to read and loved to read but that has nothing to do with teaching it.” Brown ultimately quit after the first year of the program and subsequently earned a master’s in literacy education. Likewise, Jennifer Denino¹⁴ recollected her profound discomfort: because she didn’t know how to teach

¹³ The inaugural cohort was deployed in five geographic placements that included New York City, Los Angeles, and New Orleans as well as rural Georgia and rural North Carolina.

¹⁴ Though it is unconventional in the practice of oral history to assign pseudonyms, two of our interview subjects requested that their stories be used without attribution; Jennifer Denino is a pseudonym.

reading, she remembered, she found herself “making things up as I was going along.” The result, for her, was her belief that, “I just screwed a bunch of kids. . . . I am doing a disservice here. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing” (J. Denino, personal communication, January 20, 2009). When Denino finished her two-year TFA commitment, this unease compelled her to undertake graduate coursework in education, where she believed she would learn what she had so desperately needed to understand to be able to teach more effectively.

Even in the cases when alumni believed that they had carefully planned lessons, they had not created a classroom climate that would allow them to teach those lessons. Bill Norbert remembered his annoyance at not being able to actually teach his painstakingly organized lesson: “I remember being frustrated that first year. . . . I had a lot that I wanted to offer. . . . I planned these lessons carefully and, basically, I found that the day didn’t go exactly according to plan” (B. Norbert, personal communication, January 20, 2009). Lisa Robinson concurred, “We would make these lesson plans that were incredibly detailed with all these incredibly creative ways of teaching math or teaching whatever and, you know, they just [fell] apart.” Robinson reported that there were “chairs thrown [by] the end of the second week. Hair pulling, kids punching on each other . . . and talking to each other.” Thus, while corps members may have had creativity and content knowledge, they lacked critical knowledge of pedagogy—of how to teach.

As a result of their reported teaching struggles, many alumni described feeling extremely tired or anxious during that first year of teaching. Preparing lessons at night after teaching and working to engage their students all day left them exhausted; the alumni recalled their astonishment at their students’ energy, especially in comparison to their own fatigue. Bill Norbert remembered being tired from talking and “hoarse from . . . raising my voice, which I was not used to and I was, like, this is not, you know, what I want to be about.” Scott Joftus concurred, “My throat was just always really sore. I was often discouraged. I knew I was doing a terrible job. I actually . . . [said], ‘I don’t think I’m doing anyone any good’” (S. Joftus, personal communication, June 24, 2009). Marc Stephen remembered that he was “kind of a zombie” by the end of his first week of teaching. And though her brother and sister were both teachers, Kathy Feeley dealt with the stress by smoking cigarettes and not eating rather than approaching her siblings for help or advice—as she recollects, she was too embarrassed to admit to the problems she was having in the classroom.

Distressing and even debilitating, but how different was the experience of the new TFA teachers from any other novice teacher? As research consistently demonstrates (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011, Strong, 2005), new teachers, of any degree of preparation, struggle during their first years in the classroom, especially in urban areas, as they work to master the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to teach well. In his taxonomy of the career life cycles of traditionally prepared teachers, Huberman (1989) notes that the first years of teaching, which he identified as the phase of “survival and discovery,” are marked by “reality-shock, especially for teachers with no prior teaching experience, in confronting the complexity and simultaneity of instructional management” (p. 33). In many respects, the disorientation, frustration, and challenges faced by TFA recruits mirror what many traditionally trained teachers also experience. Yet the latter group of teachers, by virtue of their more conventional training sequence, would likely have been introduced to a range of coursework and experiences over time in schools (such as fieldwork and student teaching) that would have at least exposed them to the realities of teaching and possibly even given them a rudimentary repertoire of skills that the TFA recruits had not developed in their eight-week

exposure to teacher education, which included just five weeks of half-day student teaching. Perhaps the 1990 corps members felt failures more acutely precisely because they had been touted as the best and the brightest and were, by the logic of the program, supposed to be able to succeed, especially given the belief that teaching could be “picked up” on the fly by “smart” people.

Blighted neighborhoods. First year teaching is difficult on its own merits, but the TFA participants’ instructional challenges were exacerbated by the fact that, according to program design, TFA placed participants in the most desperate schools. These were places of the highest need where the recruits would theoretically have the greatest impact as teachers, but where, realistically, the schools and communities needed far more in the way of help than TFA could possibly provide. Jonathan Kozol’s book, *Savage Inequalities* (1991), represented a muckraking *tour de force* of reporting about schools in the poorest, most desperate communities in America at the same time the first TFA participants entered their classrooms. Not surprisingly, many similar observations emerged in corps members’ memories of the places where they worked, as they recalled the conditions afflicting these communities—extreme poverty, racism, and violence.

The early 1990s were a difficult time for many American cities, given Reagan-era policies that had resulted in isolated and criminalized neighborhoods, job migration out of cities, and the resegregation of schools. Murder rates peaked in the early 1990s (before beginning their historic descent), while crack cocaine wars created hotbeds of urban violence (Levitt, 2004). More than a few alumni told of the crack vials that littered sidewalks or playgrounds at their schools. Lori Lawson, who remembered bullet holes in her classroom windows, recalled being told not to go outside the schoolyard after 11:00 a.m. because “that’s when all the drug dealers wake up in the neighborhood” (L. Lawson, personal communication, March 11, 2009). Caroline Sabin recounted finding a bullet casing on the floor of her classroom; she also shared the plight of a fellow participant assigned to a school in Compton, California, who struggled to teach over the sound of police helicopters hovering overhead (C. Sabin, personal communication, November 29, 2008). Brent Lyles remembered arriving some mornings at the “very urban school” where he student-taught fourth graders in East Los Angeles to find that “the whole school had been trashed by gangs: graffiti everywhere, broken windows.” Despite the fact that “gang kids [had] gotten into the classrooms and torn shit up,” he reminisced, “you just had to go in and do your best teaching.”

For many participants, their exposure to such communities was shocking, but also made them aware of how deeply rooted were the educational problems they had come to “solve,” and how powerfully they were intertwined with the larger social, political, and economic context. Lisa Robinson, a recruit who taught in New Orleans, recalled how her students’ families seemed stuck in a cycle of poverty that they couldn’t escape, while Mark Stephan described his experience in a rural Southern district as “a lesson in race, income, and also geography. . . . I was basically a Northerner coming to a small Southern town and trying to . . . help without realizing the complexity of race, class, [and] Southern culture” (M. Stephan, personal communication, April 9, 2009). He cited such conflicts as part of the reason he left the program. Hilary Abell, who was not one of our study participants but a source for Susan Chira’s *New York Times* coverage, suggested that “[T]o solve the problems in my classroom I would have had to solve the violence and poverty in the community. . . . TFA represented the idea that certain individuals with enthusiasm can help a troubled system. But I think much more profound changes are needed.”

Alumni memories also painted a dire picture of their particular schools’ lack of capacity and histories of failure in addressing students’ needs (see Payne, 2008). Jeffrey Simes taught in an elementary school in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, named after Ronald E. McNair, “one of the astronauts who blew up in the Challenger,” which Simes suggested was “actually kind of a fitting metaphor for the whole school.” The top floor of the four-story building couldn’t be used, because the roof leaked so badly; Simes’ own classroom had a “horrible vermin problem . . . [and] roaches everywhere all the time,” along with a sink that continuously dripped hot steamy water and never got fixed.

Beyond the poor physical condition of the schools, many participants also remembered environments excessively focused on order and control. Arthur Schuhart described his school in the Bronx as “like Fort Apache” (A. Schuhart, personal communication, March 13, 2009). Lisa Robinson remembered being mystified by all of the rules governing students’ conduct, down to how students were supposed to walk in lines, and described an authority on the part of school faculty and administration that seemed “aggressive.” Classrooms were enormously overcrowded, making management that much more difficult. As one recruit struggled to keep his third graders in line, he asked the children what a fellow teacher did to get them to behave so well. “The kids said, ‘Oh, she would hit us.’ She would tie three rulers together and just give the kids a whack if they misbehaved.” More than a few alumni had similar stories, all of which spoke to the schools’ efforts to control children. Between the difficulties associated with the schools’ communities and, often, the lack of resources or leadership at the schools themselves for dealing with the challenges that students brought to school with them, corps members recalled feeling bitterly overwhelmed at the magnitude of the task they had undertaken.

Within their testimonies, the alumni offer compelling evidence that the “best and brightest” could not be expected to ameliorate the dire effects of poverty and racism, nor to fundamentally alter the deeply entrenched institutional failures of struggling schools. (Of course, this conflict continues today, in the debate between reformers who believe that poverty should not provide an excuse for low expectations or lack of achievement, on the one hand, and those on the other who believe that schools cannot ultimately improve the educational experience in many communities without first addressing social and economic needs.) Many of the participants found the social context to be a formidable obstacle to raising student achievement; moreover, the 1990 corps members’ reactions betray the cultural deficit perspective built into the “best and brightest” approach, which tended to privilege the role of participants as saving or rescuing, as much as teaching, poor children. Indeed, many of our participants described their disillusionment, as they grew more aware (through their teaching experiences) of how flawed the “saving children” approach was.

Staying or Leaving

The alumni’s frustrations and feelings of failure led to colossal disappointment—more, in some cases than they could bear. Most alumni admitted to having contemplated leaving the program, but deciding whether or not to quit the program was complicated. Furman Brown thought about quitting “every other day.” As he explained, “[I]f I could have thought of a way to quit without letting the kids down and without letting my family down and letting myself down, I probably would have.” For R. Brent Lyles, the urge to quit occurred “every single day.” He later learned that his colleagues had expected him to drop out: “everybody thought I was next,” because, as Lyles described, “I was losing my mind, I was losing my battle with the kids. I was an awful teacher. But you know . . . I stuck it out.” Many of those who did stay, in fact, recollected having done so in order to honor their

commitment to the organization, the school in which they were teaching, or the children in their classrooms. Bill Norbert, for instance, stayed because, “I’m not a quitter.” As Marife Ramos articulated, she stayed because of “the commitment I made to Teach For America . . . if I let Teach For America down, then I let my school down” (M. Ramos, personal communication, June 6, 2009). The guilt factor was palpable in many testimonies. When Scott Joftus discussed his thoughts about quitting with someone from the organization, he remembered, at the time, “I felt . . . miserable . . . [but] they just convinced me to stick it out. And honestly it wouldn’t have taken that much [to convince me to stay] because of that guilt of not wanting to quit.” Many struggled to distinguish between their own fears of failure and their fears of “letting down” the children in the communities they had come to serve.

Some participants remembered the TFA organization working to convince corps members not to quit. After Lori Lawson decided to leave, she learned that a TFA staffer spoke to her roommate, also a corps member, about the importance of remaining in the program. Mark Stephan, who eventually did leave the program, bluntly recalled: “They didn’t want TFAers leaving, you know . . . they needed us to stick it out so they [could] continue as a program. So there was some pressure of, you know, you really need to make this work and do everything you can.”

Plenty of recruits, however, did walk away. In a first-year post mortem, the *New York Times* (1991) reported that 53 of the 489 recruits that began teaching under the auspices of TFA had resigned in the first ten months, a slightly higher figure than the national attrition rate for first-year teachers. Sociologist Steven Brill (2011) suggested that fully a third of the recruits did not persist through their two-year commitment. In Caroline Sabin’s memory, “there were a lot of people who dropped out” during that inaugural year. And according to those interviewed, quitting and knowing people who quit seemed a common occurrence. For many of those who left, leaving, rather than staying in a place where they felt they were doing a disservice, was the ethical choice.

One of those people, Jane Schneider, recalled that she had initially nurtured a “fantasy of going in and being, you know . . . sort of ultra-competent and ultra-kind,” but later realized, “it was a very naïve young, idealistic picture” (J. Schneider, personal communication, February 24, 2009). She ended up leaving after her first semester of teaching. As a recent Harvard graduate, Schneider was not used to falling short of expectations. Referring to the ways in which she was perceived at the school, and the ways in which she thought she was failing, she remembered thinking, “I can’t be in this situation where I’m that person.” Though she felt like a “bad person,” Schneider also felt that she had “gotten to a place of pain where I just . . . needed to leave.” Lori Lawson acknowledged the conflict about her decision, saying, “I did feel a real deep dedication to trying to help those kids, but I also felt that it was not, I was not doing them any great service.” At some point, she remembered, “I just could not bear going in another day,” and she walked away.

Kathy Feeley also described the act of quitting (after her first month) as having been “traumatizing.” As she mused, still emotional about it after twenty years, “it was so bad that I was forced to quit.” She elaborated:

[I]t’s hard . . . having to admit failure after a month but I just realized, you know, this isn’t good for me or my students . . . you know, I need to cut my losses now . . . admit defeat and not—there’s no—I can’t survive a school, yeah, like this. I just can’t. . . . I’m not a martyr; apparently I’m not going to, you know, save the world . . . [laughter].

Mark Stephan described being so unhappy—he remembered having panic attacks, seeing a counselor, and barely being able to get himself to school—that he could not conceive of an alternative to leaving. Stephan characterized those three months he taught in North Carolina with TFA as “one of the more traumatic periods of my entire life.” Together, these accounts underscore the inanity of expecting the unprepared recruits, no matter how “bright,” to function successfully in the circumstances in which they found themselves, much less to “save the world,” as Kathy Feeley ruefully recalled.

An Impossible Task

All things considered, the TFA recruits assigned to such placements were set up for an impossible task. No individual—“best and brightest” or not—would have been able to effect the kind of change that TFA had promised in the most beleaguered communities and schools. Leo Flanagan, currently an elementary principal in an urban setting, reflected that, “even going back now, after many years, and being a very, very good teacher,” he could not succeed in his TFA placement, given the trials of the school and students where he taught.

For 1990 corps members, the conditions—the challenges of their students and level of dysfunction in the schools and school system—were so far from what they had ever imagined could exist that the alumni strained to reconcile what they experienced with their sense of agency and ability to make change. One common casualty was their idealism, their belief that they could make a difference, or at least the kind of difference they had aimed to make through TFA. As Christina Brown noted, “I just didn’t realize how horrible it could be and how much kids could suffer in school. So it was definitely like the whole Save-the-Children, Save-the-World thing . . . you couldn’t sustain that kind of idealism in that environment.” In the end, Jeffrey Simes said, the experience made him more mature and tempered his idealism: “You go in there thinking . . . [that] goodwill will change the world, and you leave realizing that that’s necessary but not sufficient. . . . That’s a valuable lesson.”

Ironically, one reason given for the appeal of TFA for those who graduated from elite colleges and universities and would have many other choices lay in what Kopp (1989) described as the “rising spirit of voluntarism” among young Americans at the time, who seemed “increasingly idealistic.” And yet, according to Jeffrey Simes, perhaps the greatest lesson learned was the incompatibility of the recruits’ idealism with what they faced in the schools. Part of this may well have related to the alumni’s stage of life: the very process of assuming the mantle of adulthood is characterized by disillusionment (Bocknek, 1986). Beyond developmental stages, however, educational psychologist Richard Weissbourd (2003) observed that, “disillusionment—the loss of a belief that [teachers] can make a difference in students’ lives—is one of the biggest reasons that nearly one-half of teachers in the country leave teaching within the first five years” (p. 10). Being touted as the “best and brightest” did not inoculate the alumni against the loss of their idealism. As Simes believed, that might ultimately have been a good life lesson for the recruits. But it was no doubt a hard landing for many, given the unrealistic nature of their task and their histories and expectations of success as members of the “best and brightest,” and no boon to the schools they were sent to help.

Conclusion

Wendy Kopp herself acknowledged the need for TFA to make changes based on the experiences of the first-year corps. As she remembered, when the corps members “found themselves for the most part in new and unknown communities, grappling with the most

challenging teaching situations in America,” they “told us that we hadn’t set accurate expectations, that we hadn’t given them adequate training, that we weren’t providing sufficient professional development” (2001, p. 56-57). Doubling down on her faith in the “best and brightest,” Kopp concluded that TFA needed to refine its selection model. But she also recognized the need to strengthen the training that recruits received and create supports for them once they began teaching. As a result, TFA has engineered fundamental changes to its training component over the last two decades. More specifically, as education historian Jack Schneider (2014) points out, TFA has “consistently worked to improve its summer training, developing not only a coherent curriculum, but also a clear framework for lesson planning and classroom management, as well as robust systems of support, mentoring, and collaboration” (p. 426).

Ironically, despite its “alternative” rhetoric, TFA has gone about this improvement by partnering with existing schools of education and requiring recruits to participate in the local/state credentialing process while they are teaching (Schneider, 2014), and by developing new approaches (i.e., the Education for Justice Pre-Corps pilot that provides teacher training during the senior year of college for early acceptance recruits, or the effort to support participants who elect to stay beyond their two-year commitment) based on traditional ideas (Madda, 2014). Thus, though the short duration of TFA’s training makes it an outlier, the actual content of that training has been largely borrowed from the curriculum of so-called traditional teacher education. Likewise, while the complaints of our first year TFA participants reflect their unique circumstances, they also represent a lamentably common experience among new teachers in urban schools then and now, whether “traditionally” or alternatively prepared for the classroom (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011), suggesting the need to rethink overall how we prepare teachers for the most challenging classrooms. Examples of more effective approaches to teacher preparation certainly exist (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Green, 2014; Sahlberg, 2011), and many colleges and departments of teacher education are part of the larger field’s discussions about how to incorporate these ideas to make teacher education better. Turning around a heavily regulated, mass enterprise, especially one that is underfunded and relied upon by higher education as a cash cow, will certainly take time. But the shared search for a better way of preparing teachers for the most challenging classrooms should compel this endeavor to move forward, thoughtfully and in a variety of ways.

Despite such steps to improve the experiences and effectiveness of corps members, TFA and similar programs continue to foster the myth of the best and brightest as the way to solve the most intractable problems in education. The organization persists in promoting the idea that personal qualities outstrip thoughtful preparation and experience. As Sarah Matsui (2015) has observed, today, TFA still depends on “a shaky ‘hero narrative’ to lure idealists into jobs for which they’re wildly unprepared and convinces them that a ‘can-do attitude’ is all it takes.” More damningly, and in accordance with Halberstam’s observations about the “best and brightest,” Matsui suggests that TFA “illustrates how power works in America” in its clear appeal to elite constituencies.

Thanks to the high profile of TFA, the rhetoric of the “best and brightest” reverberates within contemporary media and policy conversations about how to improve schooling for the most disenfranchised students. Nearly twenty-five years after the first cohort of TFA corps members was selected to save America’s schools, and fifty years after the debacle that gave Halberstam’s book its title, it is commonplace to hear how the recruitment of the “best and brightest” is the key to success at top charter schools (Whitmire, 2015), or how former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan unleashed a

publicity blitz to recruit the “best and brightest” to the teaching profession (Simon, 2013). Americans seem to support the idea of encouraging the “best and brightest” to become teachers, both because they believe teaching ability is “a natural talent” (Lopez, 2011) and because they buy into the “best and brightest” narrative: that promising, idealistic individuals can transcend the challenges of educating low-income students by sheer dint of their hard work, dedication, and talent (Matsui & Brewer, 2015).

Yet the assumption that individuals with an elite college background, idealism, and enthusiasm, along with some rudimentary training (no matter how inexperienced or ill-suited for the classroom) will somehow solve the problems of the United States’ hardest-to-staff schools simply flies in the face of reality. As our data show, these presumptions—that any “smart” person should be able to pick up teaching by doing it, that there is no specialized base of knowledge one needs to acquire in order to teach, and that “outsiders” with little knowledge of a school community and its families can “swoop in” and “rescue” underserved students—ultimately set up and demoralized the participants with whom we spoke when they could not live up to those unrealistic expectations. (In fact, according to researchers, the “best and brightest”—as measured by exams such as the SAT—newcomer teachers are often those most likely to leave teaching; see Smith & Ingersoll, 2004.) In addition to demoralizing participants, such presumptions also serve to undermine the professional work of teaching by perpetuating troubling myths about what it takes to teach and distracting attention from more constructive conversations. As two new books, *Learning from Counternarratives in Teach For America* (2015) and *Teach For America Counter-Narratives: Alumni Speak Up and Speak Out* (2015) testify, our narrators’ experiences are not unique in the history of TFA, but rather, mark an unfortunate continuity across the organization’s past and present. Given these facts, then, why does the “best and brightest” phenomenon persist in TFA and American education? We argue that faith in the best and brightest is not only a popular cultural trope, it is also powerfully implicated in today’s prevailing vision about how to fix urban education. Such wisdom privileges outsider intervention, market-based solutions, “creative disruption” and test-based accountability. It is an approach that lacks serious acknowledgement of many issues—poverty, violence, language, social-emotional issues—that affect children’s ability to learn and that venerates elite academic credentials and idealism above practice or experience.

Interestingly, Finland, which has become the *de facto* gold standard among many reformers for what education should be like, has managed to eschew the siren call of the “best and brightest.” As researcher Pasi Sahlberg (2015) suggests, though teacher training programs could “easily pick the best and brightest of the huge pool of applicants each year,” they don’t—because they recognize that teaching potential may involve more than “admirable grades.” “What Finland shows,” he argues (2015), “is that rather than get the ‘best and brightest’ into teaching, it is better to design initial teacher education in a way that will get the best from young people who have natural passion to teach for life.”

At some point, as columnist Paul Lippe (2014) argues, when people talk about the best and brightest, they imply both an objective way of ascertaining who belongs to that group as well as a “magical connection between prior achievement, ‘elite’ credentials, and future success.” But, as he observes, that is the polar opposite of what Halberstam meant: membership in the “best and brightest” is neither meritocratic nor a substitute for in-depth and particular knowledge or the value of experience in a relevant field or set of circumstances. TFA may have instituted some changes over time to help better prepare and support corps members, but the organization has yet to relinquish the magical thinking implied by the “best and brightest.”

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